

Cinematic Archives of the Present: A Conversation with Gustavo Procopio Furtado

Bruno Guaraná

On the morning of August 20, 2019, a man hijacked a bus with thirty-five passengers in Rio de Janeiro, causing a standoff with the police on the bridge that connects that city with its neighbor to the east, Niterói. As the hijacker threatened to burn down the bus with gasoline, helicopters hovered over the scene, and news channels recorded every move they could capture from both parties. A few hostages had been released by the time the hijacker was shot—and killed—by a sniper in the police force.

Readers might be reminded of a similar case that took place in that same city nineteen years ago, famously dissected in José Padilha's documentary *Ônibus 174* (*Bus 174*, 2003; Felipe Lacerda, codirector). As the 2019 hijacking unfolded in real time, an anchor at Globo News, a twenty-four-hour-news cable channel, recalled the events of June 12, 2000, during an interview with a police chief, reminding viewers that there was one fatal victim on that occasion, twenty-year-old Geísa Firmo Gonçalves, one of the passengers taken as hostages. Whether intentionally or not, the reporter failed to mention that the hijacker, Sandro do Nascimento, was also killed—asphyxiated minutes after the standoff had been resolved, in the back of the police car that should have been taking him to a precinct. She also omitted a fact that is critical in *Bus 174*: the bullet that first hit Gonçalves came from a police sniper in an ill-fated attempt to shoot Nascimento. There were two victims that day, both of them resulting from a lack of preparedness on the part of the police force and from the insurmountable social inequality that still persists in Brazil.

The incident in August 2019 occurred in the midst of the fires that ravaged the Amazonian region and that caught the attention of the international community and its leaders. It also happened as I wrapped up reading Gustavo Procopio Furtado's vital book *Documentary Filmmaking in Contemporary Brazil: Cinematic Archives of the Present*. In one of its chapters, Furtado discusses Padilha's documentary and its



“desire to engage with and excavate the [audiovisual] record” and its “fundamental insufficiency” in explaining away the hijacking (95). As he sees it, the film’s slow-motion repetition of the moment in which Geísa is shot attempts to find answers to what really happened, to diagnose the different mishandlings of the situation—a kind of forensics previously performed on the Zapruder footage of the Kennedy assassination. Even if the film ultimately fails to provide any new revelation about the victim’s death, it illustrates Furtado’s claim that documentary work—especially the kind produced in recent years in Brazil—offers useful tools for thinking about archives. In his own work throughout the

Film Quarterly, Vol. 73, Number 2, pp. 100–105, ISSN 0015-1386, electronic ISSN 1533-8630.
© 2019 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, <http://www.ucpress.edu/journals.php?p=reprints>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/FQ.2019.73.2.100>.

book, theories of the archive illuminate readings of documentary films, helping to bring them closer to an intervention into the social structures that they enter.

Furtado's book covers the range of documentary films made in Brazil since the country's redemocratization in 1984–85, starting with Eduardo Coutinho's *Cabra marcado para morrer* (*Twenty Years Later/Man Listed to Die*, 1984). That film, originally planned as a reenactment by nonprofessional actors of the life and political assassination of a peasant union leader, took twenty years to be completed as a documentary, its interim coinciding with the military dictatorial regime, which halted production. Upon the thawing of military rule, Coutinho discovers his footage—once thought to be lost—and revisits his nonactors in an effort to reconnect people then living in secrecy. A mesmerizingly close analysis of Coutinho's film offers a fitting start to Furtado's book, as the film quite literally makes use of an earlier archive of images to construct its rhetoric and engages in efforts of preservation, inscribing new records and ensuring their endurance.

Fundamental to Furtado's book is an expansive notion of the archive that considers documentary films not only as they deal with archives (found footage, memory, official records, historical documents and narratives, as well as the suppression, deliberate or not, of records) but equally as archives in their own right, with their production of images, histories, testimonies, and even political action. They make up the "cinematic archives of the present," composing and intervening in history and cultural memory. This framework enables Furtado to go well beyond careful textual analysis and into an insightful and illuminating critical examination of film's innate relationship with notions of the archive, from its technological indexicality to its social and cultural import.

In the first section of the book, Furtado focuses on ethnographic modes of documentary production, discussing the parallels and contrasts between exploratory films and their reverse: indigenous videomaking and its reclaiming of an alternative ethnographic archive. Here films become the representation of and a metaphor for contact zones, presenting both possibilities and risks for indigenous populations and challenging common understandings of nationality (and of Brazil as a nation). The second part focuses on points of contact across disparate classes in the urban environment, and the negotiations between visibility and invisibility, center and margins, as taken up by documentary films. Here the ethics of documentary practice take center stage, as Furtado exposes the risks of exposure and visibility in situations in which invisibility can itself be a form of resistance. In its final section, the book offers a close look at "intimate archives"

and the repurposing of home records and mementos, focusing on the intimacy of domestic labor (which both exacerbates and masks the boundaries between public and private) and journeys of self-discovery that address the painful memories of Brazil's military dictatorship. Drawing an arc from the national to the urban to the private, Furtado covers an impressive number of films, highlighting the many different ways in which they are in dialogue with one another and articulating their own status as archival documents.

At every turn, the archive as conceived by Furtado and composed by his selection of films increases in elasticity, extending its limits at the reader's discretion. By the end of the book, one gets the sense that everything and every film necessarily carries within it an archival impulse, and one might well be inclined to investigate the implication of that impulse, following Furtado's lead. His corpus is thematically sound and hermetically bound by his structure of inquiry but easily could have been even wider—a fact that in no way diminishes his accomplishments in the book. In no small measure, Furtado offers a road map and vocabulary needed for potential new iterations of his work to take up new documentaries both from Brazil and from other regions beyond this corpus.

In light of the growing recognition of the late Eduardo Coutinho as a master of documentary filmmaking, Padilha's bombshell of a film on the bus hijacking, and works by a new generation of filmmakers such as Adirley Queirós and Maria Augusta Ramos, documentary production appears as one of the most exciting media practices in Brazil.¹ It is indefensible, frankly, that the first English-language monograph on the subject is appearing only now. Yet Furtado takes on the task with great deftness, dutifully paying off the delay. His breadth of work includes films as urgent as his analyses: timely and encouraging, offering the respite of a media practice that has the potential to disrupt the injustices and binaries that have become so prevalent.

Further, as though inviting a continuation of the analyses he puts forth, Furtado does not offer an endpoint in his study. In lieu of a conclusion, the last section of his book is an epilogue that considers current structural and economic changes that might hamper Brazil's film industry—and hopes that documentary, as an alternative practice in so many respects, will continue to flourish, with its unique ability to access, disrupt, and construct archives of knowledge.

As Furtado delineates, archives are battlegrounds between visibility and marginality, speech and silence, remembering and forgetting, center and margins. It seems today that two decades may be too long ago to remember, that Brazilians are

in urgent need of a wake-up call to conjure up what *really* happened—not only in the hijacking of bus 174, but during the military dictatorship (1964–85) or, today, with the forest expeditions that have decimated indigenous populations and jeopardized environmental sustainability in the region.

With the 2018 election of a far-right president in Brazil, new “archives of the present” suddenly seem to make oblique appearances in Furtado’s book, even though the manuscript was completed before any of these events had taken place. They are a testament to the book’s timeliness and expansive quality, creating hope that the next wave of documentary films might intervene in this archive, challenging and reshaping articulations of and responses to social injustice. In a move that can be transposed onto other contexts, Furtado’s book convinces the reader to think of contemporary Brazilian documentary as a field “that serves as both a platform to reflect on and a tool to intervene in situations marked by asymmetrical distributions of power and pending social justice” (3). In the conversation that follows, Furtado and I discuss his process of research and writing, the pedagogical and political implications of his work, exciting new documentary films, and, inevitably, Jair Bolsonaro.

BRUNO GUARANÁ: Your book acknowledges recent Brazilian documentary as a particularly diverse and inclusive field, naming and analyzing a wide range of films made by people who, in earlier periods of Brazilian film history, lacked access to the means of production. How did this project come about? Did your research start with Eduardo Coutinho’s *Cabra marcado para morrer*, which is in your epilogue?

GUSTAVO PROCOPIO FURTADO: Coutinho is one my favorite filmmakers, of any genre, and his work was very important in drawing me to the field of Brazilian documentaries and documentary studies in general. But what initially inspired my book was the way that disparate Brazilian films were doing comparable work in relation to archives and the archive concept. Films like Coutinho’s classic *Cabra marcado para morrer*, Mari Corrêa and Karané Ikpeng’s *Pirinop, meu primeiro contato* [*Pirinop, My First Contact*, 2007], João Moreira Salles’s *Santiago* [2007], and others I watched later, including Adirley Queirós’s *Branco sai, preto fica* [*White Out, Black In*, 2015] and Flávia Castro’s *Diário de uma busca* [*Diary, Letters, Revolutions*, 2010], are very different and demand attention to the specificities of their settings, histories, and styles. Yet they establish and explore relationships between documentary filmmaking and the archive that I thought were not adequately explained through the way documentary film

studies typically discusses archives—usually in reference to compilation and found-footage films, like Jaimie Baron’s excellent book *The Archive Effect*.²

These Brazilian films, on the other hand, engaged intensely with archives and concepts of the archive but were not compilation films. Archival footage is often important and incorporated, but archives were also significant as components of the filmmaking process and of the events occurring in front of the camera, the documentary’s mise-en-scène. Dealing with the recuperation and resignification of materials from the past, these films deploy filmmaking as a means for meditating on and intervening in multiple forms of archival preservation and loss, including film itself. My book emerged from my thinking about the relatedness of such diverse films made in disparate places—from indigenous villages to posh urban homes.

GUARANÁ: One of the things I find most compelling in your book is your ability to elucidate the dialogical relationship between disparate films, creating a web of signification that exceeds those individual texts. This dialogism seems to me to be a product of the “archive” framework: films as archives, films about archives, and films as counterarchives. I’m curious about how you made your film selection and how the project arrived at this final stage, starting from that first corpus of films.

FURTADO: Yes, the relatability of seemingly disparate work was at the very genesis of the project. For the inclusiveness of the book, there was a secondary motivation as well. As this is the first English-language book on recent Brazilian documentary, I thought it was important to offer not just an argument with in-depth analyses of selected films but also a somewhat panoramic view of the field—though with no desire or pretention of writing a comprehensive introduction. I needed establishing shots as well as close-ups. My hope was to speak to different types of readers at once—including Brazilian film scholars like yourself and newcomers to Brazil and Brazilian cinema. It’s a tricky negotiation of audiences, and I am not sure if I succeeded in striking the right balance. It took me some time to develop a structure that allowed me to deal with both the similarities and dissimilarities among the films. In the end I opted for the three-part structure: the first focused on films produced in the Amazon and central Brazil; the second, on films located in and at the margins of urban centers; and the last, on films that emerge from the spaces of private life and deal with the public-private border. These three parts include quite a lot of contemporary documentary production [but] certainly did not let

me include everything. In any case, this spatial organization helped me choose what films to include.

GUARANÁ: It was difficult to choose, but my favorite chapter of your book might be the fourth one, in which you highlight what you call documentary’s “tactics of the invisible,” focusing mostly on Adirley Queirós’s films and iterations of Brasília in film. I was particularly moved by how you find an almost poetic parallel between Cinema Novo and contemporary films from Brasília, which has become a powerhouse of film production in the past few years. The limited geographical focus of this chapter reminded me of a healthy decentering of film production in Brazil, sprouting films that resist traditional aesthetics and models not only in Brasília, but also in states like Minas Gerais and Pernambuco. What was the reason behind dedicating one chapter to Brasília films, as opposed to the thematic corpus the other chapters adopt?

FURTADO: I am glad you like that chapter! It is different from the others in that way. Each chapter draws on a genealogy of films and filmmaking practices to establish a context for examining what contemporary films are doing. The Queirós chapter draws on previous iterations of Brasília, as you mentioned, but engages with no other contemporary films. The reason is simply that Adirley Queirós is unique. Combining science fiction and documentary, his *Branco sai, preto fica* is a singular film in Brazilian cinema, and as far as I know has few relatable examples anywhere. I can think of the Afrofuturism of John Akomfrah’s *The Last Angel of History* [1996], or of Kidlat Tahimik’s Third World futuristic travelogue, *Mababangong Bangungot* [*Perfumed Nightmare*, 1977], as possible points of comparison. *Branco sai* evokes Jean Rouch’s *Moi, un noir* [*I, a Negro*, 1958] as well—especially because of its participants’ fictional alter egos. In the end, I decided that Queirós’s work was unique and therefore deserving of enough attention to warrant its own chapter. Moreover, the chapter’s focus on Brasília allowed me to bring up some rarely discussed but very pertinent and interesting films. Vladimir Carvalho’s *Conterrâneos velhos de guerra* [1992] and *Brasília segundo Feldman* [1979] are both antecedents for Queirós’s “tactics of the invisible” in the Federal District. *Brasília segundo Feldman* was a particularly happy discovery. It’s a beautiful short film.

Films from Pernambuco and Minas Gerais are comparable examples, as you say, insofar as they break with former aesthetic models and are produced outside the dominant axis of Rio–São Paulo. Like Queirós’s work, many also blur

fiction and documentary in suggestive ways: Gabriel Mascaro’s *Avenida Brasília Formosa* [2010] in the case of your hometown, Recife; or Marília Rocha’s *A falta que me faz* [2009] in the case of my home state of Minas Gerais. The recent films from Contagem, a city on the outskirts of Belo Horizonte, like Affonso Uchoa’s *A vizinhança do tigre* [*The Hidden Tiger*, 2014] and João Dumans and Uchoa’s *Arábia* [*Araby* 2017], add further examples to this list, clearly demonstrating new sensibilities and blurring genre expectations.

GUARANÁ: In your book you write about filmmakers as “archons of the audiovisual,” borrowing from Derrida’s discussion of the role of the creator and protector, or sentry, of the archive.³ I see a lot of this same intellectual labor in your effort to bring works of wide acclaim and more obscure, but equally important, ones to parity. Do you see yourself in that same light as those filmmakers—that is, as an archon—producing audiovisual archives through your academic work?

FURTADO: Yes, I relate to that: the role of archeologist and archon. Film theorist Domietta Torlasco describes the cuts in a film as folds that point to a virtual archive or an archive of the virtual.⁴ In his film *Santiago*, filmmaker João Moreira Salles talks about the “secrets of the film” to refer to what is disposed of through the editing process. Books also have seams and virtual archives. I kept that in mind as I chose what to include and what to exclude. This affects my role as a teacher as well. I hope readers will explore this virtual archive, beyond what I include in the footnotes. More books should be written on Brazilian films—documentaries or otherwise.

GUARANÁ: You focus attention on lesser-known films like Flávia Castro’s *Diário de uma busca* and Maria Clara Escobar’s *Os dias com ele* [*The Days with Him*, 2012]. Both of these films deal with the memory of Brazil’s military dictatorship and bring to light the urgency of the archive—what it constitutes, who makes it, who controls it, who accesses it. In addition to these, you analyze other important films that deal with that period’s trauma and its lingering melancholia. But segments of Brazilian society continue to call for the return of a military regime. Are they already forgetting such a recent history? How does your framework of films and archives help situate this cinema as urgent and necessary?

FURTADO: There is no way to deal with the present or the future without engaging with the past. And the past is never quite finished. It’s always a bit provisional and under

construction. Documentary cinema allows for the recirculation and resignification of past materials even as the films themselves become archival sources available for future retrievals, circulations, resignifications.

The current situation in Brazil is bleak. Brazil's future is not what it used to be, as the saying goes. But it's not just the future or the present that is in danger. The past is also under attack. Major events are being reshaped, renamed, whitewashed with a mixture of glibness and resentful anger. The 1964 coup becomes a "revolution." The period in which the Workers' Party, the Partido dos Trabalhadores, occupied the presidency is being described by many as an unmitigated disaster that bankrupted the country. (Of course the actions and legacy of the Workers' Party's governments should be critically debated, even by party members and supporters—though at this moment, with Bolsonaro in the presidency, they are not the ones most in need of self-critique.) At any rate, the notion that the Workers' Party's governments were an unqualifiable disaster is an oblivious and violent rewriting of the recent past. Brazil needs to remember better. We all do, and this task is well within the domain of the documentary.

GUARANÁ: We've now arrived at the topic of contemporary politics. You finished the book in the spring of 2018, not too long before the election of far-right populist Jair Bolsonaro to the presidency in Brazil, but your epilogue seems to anticipate the fate of the country's political scenario. Bolsonaro represents and defends the interest of an anti-indigenist, promilitary, and elite-oriented segment of the electorate, in a triad that seems to be in stark opposition to three key themes in your book. Additionally, his administration has put the traditional structures of funding available to the national film production in Brazil in serious jeopardy. Yet, you suggest that the current crisis in the country might actually present an opportune moment for the proliferation of new politicized documentaries that, to put it simply, speak truth to power by making visible and accessible an archive of images that could question the authority and power of the few. How do you hold on to that optimism from the spring of 2018?

FURTADO: Perhaps that was wishful thinking. I don't want to diminish the fact that art, culture, and even academic-knowledge production are under attack. Making films in Brazil is getting much harder. We are probably back to the cycles of booms and busts that characterize Brazilian film history.

But at the end of the book I placed a bet on documentary's future with two ideas in mind. First, I was thinking about the resilience of the genre, which can withstand hardships much better than fiction films. Have you noticed that in adverse situations fiction films often start to look more like documentaries? Neorealism and Cinema Novo, for instance, drew their substance from the grit of everyday life. Unlike narrative films, documentaries can be made on a shoestring and even by a person working alone. Almost any adversity can inform and contribute to the film, adding layers of historicity that could not be faked. Some of the most consequential Brazilian films illustrate this, like Coutinho's *Cabra*, Salles's *Santiago*, Vincent Carelli's *Corumbiara* [2009], and Andrea Tonacci's *Serras da desordem* [*Hills of Disorder*, 2007]. These films are successful in part because they incorporate obstacles, interruptions, even failures.

The other reason why I ended the book by speaking of the documentary's future is that it's in difficult periods that the documentary might be most valuable. The Amazon is literally in flames. The police have been given the right to kill with impunity. Social safety nets, frail as they were, are being ripped up. Some Brazilian government officials believe climate change is a global conspiracy promoted by the "Marxist cultural left." (That's us, by the way.) Not even the past is safe. These might be hard times to make documentary films—but they are hard times not to.

GUARANÁ: What are newer films—from Brazil or elsewhere—that would fit within your scope and which you can recommend as companion pieces to your book? And which films have you seen prior to finishing the book but which didn't make its final cut?

FURTADO: Some very relevant films were coming out just as I was wrapping up the manuscript, like Vincent Carelli's *Martírio* [2019] and Maria Augusta Ramos's *O processo* [*The Trial*, 2018], which I incorporated in the book's epilogue. Other films came out after, such as the long-awaited and very well received *Democracia em vertigem* [*The Edge of Democracy*, 2019, on Netflix], by Petra Costa.

There were many films that I hoped to include but could not, for one reason or another, like Arthur Fontes and Dorrit Harazim's *A Família Braz: Dois Tempos* [2010]. Their film presents a working-class family in São Paulo in 2000 and then again, a decade later, in 2010, and registers the changes in their lives, including their ascension to the lower middle class. Given all that's happened since 2010, I would welcome a third installment of the film. I also really appreciate the work of filmmakers who place documentary and video art

in dialogue, like Carlos Nader, Cao Guimarães, Joel Pizzini, Clarissa Campolina, Eryk Rocha, and Sandra Kogut, to name a few.

Many international films can also be put in dialogue with the framework of my book—and some were even influential in my thinking process, like works by Agnès Varda, Abbas Kiarostami's *Nemā-ye nazdik* [*Close-Up*, 1990], and Rithy Panh's incredibly moving film *L'image manquante* [*The Missing Picture*, 2013]. I think Panh's film was instrumental in helping me think about the documentary beyond the representational paradigm as a means for working through problems, sometimes at an experiential, even somatic level. The works of several Latin American filmmakers come to mind as possible companions as well, such as films by Patricio Guzmán, Andrés di Tella, Paz Encina, Tatiana Huezo, and Gastón Solnicki.

You also asked about what I am watching now. I have mostly been watching films from the 1970s that are not entirely recommendable. But of more recent films that have really impacted me, two come to mind. The first is Hogir Hirori and Shinwar Kamal's *The Deminer* [2017], which is made mostly from amateur footage of a former Iraqi soldier tirelessly disarming land mines. The other is Talal Derki's *An al-'ābā' wal-'abnā* [*Of Father and Sons*, 2017], also made with amateur home footage and offering an intimate portrayal of fathers and sons in a jihadist family in Syria—Derki's relatives. Both of these films left me kind of wounded, but I am glad I saw them.

GUARANÁ: Can you give us an idea about your new work?

FURTADO: My next project will be about audiovisual production in the Amazon, from the 1960s onward, including works of cinema, video, and television. I am interested in thinking about the transformations of the Amazon and of the audiovisual media during this period and in the ways in which moving images render Amazonian space to viewers in other parts of the planet. The project is provisionally titled *Mapping the Amazonian Moving Image: Territoriality, Film-making, and the Senses*.

BOOK DATA: Gustavo Procopio Furtado, *Documentary Filmmaking in Contemporary Brazil: Cinematic Archives of the Present*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. \$99.00 cloth; \$39.95 paper. 265 pages.

Notes

1. In their introduction to the dossier published by this journal celebrating Coutinho's oeuvre, Natalia Brizuela and B. Ruby Rich call him the greatest documentarian in recent Brazilian cinema, but one who has been “woefully underrecognized in the United States and [not] adequately incorporated into the global history of documentary cinema.” Published in the spring of 2016, the dossier works to correct that oversight. See Natalia Brizuela and B. Ruby Rich, “An Introduction to Coutinho,” *Film Quarterly* 69, no. 3 (Spring 2016): 9.
2. Jaimie Baron, *The Archive Effect: Found Footage and the Audiovisual Experience of History* (New York: Routledge, 2013).
3. See Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
4. See Domietta Torlasco, *The Heretical Archive: Digital Memory at the End of Film* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).